



To:
Councillor Andrew Stevens
Cabinet Member for Environment
and Infrastructure

Please ask for: Scrutiny
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Date 7 December 2023
Dyddiad:

Summary: This is a letter from the Public Rights of Way Scrutiny Working Group to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure. The letter concerns the meeting held on 22 November 2023. A response is required by 4 January 2024.

Dear Councillor Stevens,

On the 22 November, a Scrutiny Working Group was held to look at the issue of Public Rights of Way (PROW). We are grateful to you and the Countryside Access Team for attending.

The officer presented a comprehensive report, and we heard a summary of the work carried out by the team and the number of routes they maintain. This included work on the 10-year Countryside Action Plan which is due to be adopted in Spring 2024. This will have a focus on improving coastal access, increasing connectivity, and increasing easy to use paths to 75%. In addition, you praised the benefits from public rights of way which include physical health, mental health, social and a boost to tourism and raised awareness of the Countryside Access Code.

We queried the team's annual budget, as information received in the meeting and the layout of the figures in the report suggested that grants received were being deducted from the team's revenue budget. We have however received reassurance and information from the Section 151 Officer and yourself that this is not the case. You explained that grant funding an important part of the resources available and is in addition to any core budgets held and we are satisfied with this response. We would however like to see a breakdown of budget and grant spending.

Regarding staffing, the officer explained this has been an issue due to cuts over the years leaving a smaller team which is more at risk when affected by unforeseen circumstances like staff illness. We were concerned this could be a contributing factor

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to a reduction in the maintenance service over time. The officer also stressed the increased cost of contractors also impacts the budget. We held concerns regarding the stress and work pressures that a heavy workload can cause, particularly the physical aspects of the job. We were pleased to hear of the wider section restructure which will hopefully provide more wider team support and an awareness of the occupational health and counselling support opportunities.

We heard that there are discrepancies between English and Welsh legislation and asked for more information on this, officers reported that in Wales diversion orders still require advertising in a local newspaper at a cost however in England the law was changed so that these orders only need to go on their website which is free. Additionally in Wales two separate orders are required whereas in England these orders are incorporated. We were concerned this uses up a large portion of the budget unnecessarily.

We asked how new cycleways will fit into the PROW network and were informed that active travel routes are adopted and maintained by highways and are viewed as a compliment to the network rather than part of it.

We were interested to learn how internal departments work together to promote PROW and heard about the Council and visit Swansea Bay websites, local signage, and information boards. We heard the closing of Tourist Information Centres has impacted promotion however leaflets are shared in local libraries, tourism facilities like campsites, the civic centre and local tourism websites. In addition to this we suggested the Quadrant and railway stations as areas for marketing. We also suggested if statutory letters like council tax bills which are already being sent to the public could be utilised by adding in a flyer advertising where more information on PROW could be found.

We asked about the available funding and heard that around £120,000 comes from Natural Resources Wales and the Gower Society. We were please to hear that collaboration occurs with the AONB and Nature Conversation Teams to explore other sources of funding as well as volunteer groups and that the team partners with Community councils. We encourage partnership working were possible including with local businesses and schools.

We were particularly interested in new developments, and we would want every opportunity taken to make sure that foot paths within those developments connect with other areas and that existing PROW on development sites are protected as well as linking into the wider area and the countryside. We heard that the team are consulted in planning and pre planning applications to ensure the path network is maintained and enhanced and the local development plan in reviewed.

We asked whether the increase in tree felling due to ash die back has added pressure to team and heard that trees over footpaths are the landowner's responsibility however the team do step in when required so this can create additional pressure. Accurate information from the public including photographs and location can aid this process.

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the briefing received and questions asked we held a discussion on progress and made the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. We want to express our praise for the Countryside Access Team who provide an excellent service with limited resources.
2. We request that the Cabinet Member lobby the Welsh Local Government Association to introduce legislation in Wales regarding duplication of diversion orders. This legislation has been introduced in England for several years and there are clear resource and cost savings to be made by making this change.
3. We would like to see more detailed budget expenditure for the years provided in the report which were 2016-2023. For instance, in 2023 we were given figures of £98596 for grants, £250800 for salaries, material, plant etc and £45300 on maintenance. Could this and previous years be expanded to give a breakdown of spend for each of these figures.
4. We understand that the Active Travel network is separate from the PROW map and there are statutory implications, however there may be more opportunities for a joined-up approach as currently Active Travel is maintained by highways and PROW by the Countryside Access Team. Integrating the routes and maintaining an overview of both would provide a clearer picture and a collaborative approach.
5. We encourage partnership working where possible including the National Trust and the Active Travel Teams to maximise the opportunities to share resources.
6. We wish to encourage Councillors with routes in their ward to promote these locally through Community social media, local groups, and publications.
7. We recommend continued development of local marketing and to include the bus station, railway station and other high footfall locations for advertising.
8. Collaborative working between the Countryside Access Team and the tourism department to promote active holidays and incorporate rights of way in tourism promotion.
9. Consider apprenticeship schemes to help with outdoor work and shadowing officers. This will help with current workload and create future trained staff in this area.
10. Resources are clearly a concern with a demonstrated reduction in staff support over the last few years. The financial investment is minor compared to some new developments yet the return on having these rights of way in Swansea is huge. We feel if footfall and usage increases this may demonstrate the need for increased budgets.

Your Response

We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the issues raised in this letter and would ask that you respond to the points in our conclusions by 4 January 2024.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Mike White

Convener, Scrutiny Working Group – Public Rights of Way

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